

**STATEMENT OF DURAND JONES, DEPUTY DIRECTOR, NATIONAL PARK SERVICE,
DEPARTMENT OF THE INTERIOR, BEFORE THE SUBCOMMITTEE ON NATIONAL PARKS,
RECREATION AND PUBLIC LANDS OF THE HOUSE COMMITTEE ON RESOURCES,
REGARDING H. RES. 261, RECOGNIZING THE HISTORICAL SIGNIFICANCE OF THE
AQUIA SANDSTONE QUARRIES OF GOVERNMENT ISLAND IN STAFFORD COUNTY,
VIRGINIA, FOR THEIR CONTRIBUTIONS TO THE CONSTRUCTION OF THE CAPITAL OF
THE UNITED STATES**

FEBRUARY 7, 2002

Mr. Chairman, thank you for the opportunity to present the Department of the Interior's views on H. Res. 261, recognizing the historical significance of the Aquia sandstone quarries of Government Island in Stafford County, Virginia, for their contributions to the construction of the Capital of the United States. Since the resolution involves a statement of Congressional recognition and would not become law, our comments are limited to providing background information for the consideration of the committee.

Aquia sandstone, or "freestone" as it was called in the colonial period, found along the Potomac River, was prized for construction because of the ease with which it could be carved and transported to building sites along the Potomac. The rock is composed primarily of quartz sand, pebbles, and clay pellets, cemented by silica. But unlike many sandstones, its matrix is harder than its crystals, giving it a quality of toughness without brittle hardness. The course-grained stone is light gray or tan, streaked or clouded with buff, yellow or red and thus is very warm toned. Although the stone was eventually found to be ill-suited for building purposes, the problems were overlooked at the time because of its immediate availability during the late colonial-early republican period.

Large deposits of freestone existed on Wigginton's Island, a twelve-acre tract along Aquia Creek in Stafford County, Virginia, which would later become known as "Government Island." The island was purchased by George Brent in 1694. The Brents established a quarry that provided tombstones and stone trim work for some of the colonial mansions and churches of Virginia, among them Mount Airy, Gunston Hall, Christ Church in Alexandria, and the Aquia Church in Stafford County. George Washington had stone steps and walks for Mount Vernon quarried and cut there in 1786.

While planning for the construction of the White House and the Capitol in the new city of Washington, George Washington selected freestone as the building material for the new executive residence and Capitol. The Commissioners of the District of Columbia sent Pierre Charles L'Enfant to locate quarry sites and buy the land for the quarry. L'Enfant purchased Wigginton's Island for the government in 1791.

Architect of the White House James Hoban was assigned the responsibility of superintending the construction of both the White House and the Capitol. The buildings used the same Aquia stone and appear to have been managed as a single construction project. In 1800 the President's House and the Senate wing of the Capitol were ready for use.

Aquia sandstone continued to be quarried until the finishing of the original Capitol in 1825. The original Treasury building, the earliest locks and bridges of the Chesapeake and Ohio Canal, and the original Patent Office are all constructed of Aquia sandstone. Also built with Aquia sandstone were the original gateposts and gatehouse for a fence designed by Charles Bulfinch that once surrounded the U.S. Capitol. The Bulfinch gatehouses and gateposts were moved from the Capitol grounds in 1873 and can still be seen at the corners

of 15th and 17th and Constitution Avenues. Here the original quarried Aquia sandstone can be seen in the raw, without the paint and whitewash that covered the walls of the White House and Capitol from the earliest times.

With the burning of the White House and Capitol by British troops in 1814, the Aquia stone walls appeared cracked and split. Much of the walls had to be taken down and rebuilt, and the defects of the stone became apparent. Many of the newer government buildings were then built with marble and granite, brought to Washington by the new railroads.

In 1857 a nearby land owner complained to the Department of the Interior through his Congressman that squatters were living on Wiggington's Island (by then known as Government Island) because the government had abandoned it after almost entirely exhausting the freestone. The Interior Department responded by appointing the landowner as a government agent for the island.

Federal ownership of Government Island became even more tenuous during and after the Civil War. In 1878, the Aquia quarry was considered abandoned and sold by the state of Virginia to a private landowner. In 1959, when the owner intended to log the island, the unclear title was brought to the attention of the Architect of the Capitol, who alerted the Justice Department of a possible Federal claim to the property. Confirming Federal ownership, the Justice Department turned the property over to the General Services Administration for sale. In 1963, Government Island was sold by GSA to a private individual for \$6,345.

Stafford County purchased Government Island a few years ago for use as a public park. Currently, plans are being developed to open the site to the public and to provide recognition of the important role the sandstone from the property played in the history of the construction of our nation's capital city.

Mr. Chairman, that concludes my statement. I would be pleased to answer any questions you or other members of the subcommittee may have.

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